

THE GLADDEN LECTURE
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In the hills just outside Prague, there is a concentration camp built and operated by the Nazis from 1942 till the end of the war. Terezin is its name, and it is unusual because it was built for the express purpose of covering up what the Nazis were actually doing to Jews and Gypsies, priests and preachers, handicapped people, marginalized people. Terezin was a “model ghetto” -even billed as Hitler’s gift to the Jews;

some Jews went there voluntarily because they thought they would be safe.

The Red Cross was invited to inspect the camp and was fooled. You can still see the spacious bathrooms, showers, sinks with mirrors—built for the Red Cross inspection and used just once.

Jews and others were sent to Terezin before being shipped to extermination centers. Every one of its inhabitants was condemned, in advance, to die.

Another unusual dimension of Terezin is the number of children who passed through its gates: 15,000 in three years. Only 100 survived. They did what children do while they were there: laughed and played, argued and fought, skipped

**and ran, made up games and drew pictures—
sometimes on the walls of their crowded
barracks, sometimes in notebooks or on scraps of
paper.**

**The pictures, which the Allied forces discovered
when they liberated the camp, depict life inside
from a child's perspective and therefore are
precious historical artifacts. But they are also—
because they are pictures of flowers and birds
and butterflies, lots of butterflies—those pictures
are a witness to the central Christian affirmation
—hope in the midst of despair; life in the midst of
death. It is our secret. It is the reason we exist
as a church.**

The Fourth Presbyterian Church is located in one of the most privileged urban neighborhoods in the world. But if you leave Fourth Church and drive west on Chicago Avenue and pick up Ogden and angle, with the loop to your left, to Washington Boulevard, and continue directly west, you will come to the United Center and if you continue past United Center and drive three more miles or so, you will see an urban environment very different from Michigan Avenue. You will not like what you see. You will have to remind yourself that this is the United States of America in the year of our Lord 2001, the wealthiest nation in the history of the world,

whose political attention is currently focused on how to use its unprecedented budget surplus. Driving west a few miles on Washington Boulevard, you will have to remind yourself where you are: that you are not in a third world country.

On the corner of the 4300 block of Washington Boulevard, you will see a huge, beautiful old church building, the New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church. Inside, if you look up into the gorgeously ornate dome, you will see pictures of saints and popes and archbishops. On the side walls you will see carved in stone, the fourteen Stations of the Cross and you will realize that New Mount

Pilgrim Baptist Church was once a Roman Catholic Church. When your eyes move to the front of the church where risers for the choir and a central pulpit stand where the high altar used to be, you will be startled by two huge posters flanking the chancel. They are pictures of children, a boy and a girl, about four years old, beautiful African American children.

The message on the posters will jar you. One says, "I want to live," which apparently is not a given for a child living on the west side of Chicago. The other says, "Don't shoot. I want to grow up."

I made the drive to the New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church because I am a member of the Religious Leadership Task Force of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention. Violence prevention is an urgent priority for the people who live on West Washington Boulevard. Unemployment, drugs and gunfire make it a unique American neighborhood. I met a wonderful eighteen year old, Germain Jones, who, by mid-adolescence had joined a gang, committed crimes, dealt and used drugs, shot people, done time and was out on parole. “My church saved me,” Germaine said. “My pastor wouldn’t let me go. It’s tough, but Christ is with me,”

As I drove back to Fourth Church, I kept thinking of the familiar text:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Midway through the story of Jesus, as related in the gospels, there is a shift in attention and focus from Galilee to Jerusalem, from small villages, lakes, and open spaces, to a big city.

It is an important text, particularly for those of us whose home is a modern day Jerusalem.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: “According to the Bible,” there are three chief places where God reveals God’s self to us: on mountaintops, in the wilderness, and in the city. The air is thin in the first; there are wild beasts in the second; but the city may be the hardest place of all to recognize the presence and activity of God.” (“Looking for God in the City,” *Envisioning the New City*, p.183)

The problem—the problem I had driving out West Washington, is that the city can be pretty harsh, cruel, unforgiving, ugly and violent.

At the end of *City of God*, E. L. Doctorow's intriguing new novel, there is a remarkable passage about the city.

The book is about, among many other things, a romance between Sarah Blumenthal, a beautiful young widow—a rabbi; and Thomas Pemberton—a defrocked Episcopal priest who continues to be intoxicated by the thought of God although he has jettisoned most conventional theology. Sarah's synagogue is an unconventional gathering of skeptics in a loft on the upper west side of Manhattan: a Synagogue of Evolutionary Judaism. Doctorow writes:

(Insert)

Nowhere is the appalling gap between the rich and the poor more evident than in the city. Jim Wallis, Editor of *Sojourner's Magazine*, lives in a poor section of Washington. There are so many empty, burned out, disintegrating houses that his young son once asked, "Daddy, was there a war here?" Wallis, an Evangelical Christian with a strong sense of the social implications of the Gospel, talks about Burger King Moms. Unlike "Soccer Moms," courted by both political parties in recent elections, no one pays attention to Burger King Moms, urban single mothers, trying to move from welfare to work, who bring their

children with them to their place of employment because they have no other alternatives. I witnessed it at Starbucks in Northwestern Hospital. Three young children, maybe 8,6 and 4, sitting at a table with coloring books and crayons, more interested in the sugar packets, their mother racing back and forth from the counter where she was working and where her customers were becoming impatient and surly, to the table to try to supervise her children. If we want poor people to move from welfare to work, we have to do better than this.

And drugs and guns, together the cancer that threatens to undo us. We have created a lethal

environment for young urban Americans. We have bombarded them with commercial messages from their infancy that tell them their worth as human beings depends on buying and consuming. And we have arranged for a way they can make a lot of money quickly and easily and join the rest of us. We wonder why they don't find part-time jobs at minimum wage and no benefits attractive; why they choose instead to join the one really successful business enterprise in the neighborhood—drugs. Wallis says 10-year-old kids in his neighborhood wear beepers, not because they are little doctors or lawyers or business executives, but because they are runners and spotters and when a drug deal is

about to happen, they can make a hundred dollars in a few minutes.

If you think that we have the answer to this, that propping up the astronomical cost of cocaine by making it illegal and therefore assuring that it is one of the most profitable items in the market place, and that filling up our jails with drug users —making us the uncontested world leader in the percentage of our population in prison, if you think we are winning the war against drugs, you should probably not see the motion picture *Traffic*. It will make you very uncomfortable. Maybe it will make enough of us angry that we will begin to demand something more of the

politicians than the tired old moralistic thinking that has put us in this terrible place. Maybe if enough people get angry we will begin to demand a thorough public conversation about whether addiction is best regarded as a criminal offense or a treatable condition, about whether rehabilitation programs don't work at least as effectively as a very costly penal system that serves to train petty criminals in the art and skill of major crime, a conversation about whether a government-regulated program to control but make available illegal drugs under carefully proscribed conditions, might not have the immediate effect of eliminating profitability and therefore the entire industry of drug importing,

shipping, processing, selling, delivering—which in turn produces rampant crime and violence.

And guns: if there is anything more dangerous and more foolish than our approach to drug traffic, is it not the easy accessibility of guns to anyone who wants to use one? Not guns for hunting or sport, but guns designed to kill human beings, hand guns, guns small enough to tuck into your backpack and carry to school one day, guns easily obtainable on that adolescent day when you're down and hassled and sick and tired of it all and some buddy tells you you're worthless. 190 million guns are circulating in our country—some 65 million handguns. The

President called it an act of “disgraceful cowardice” when a 15 year old in Santee, California, killed two students and wounded 13. But is it not also disgraceful that it was all so easily done, that the fact that he had the gun in his backpack is now a daily occurrence in schools everywhere?

Jesus lamented over the city but he was not intimidated or deterred. His people are called to live in the city, to love the city and never to stop trying to claim the city as the habitation of God.

**Urban scholar, Donna Schaper, calls that being a
“Public Church.” A Public Church does three
things:**

--chooses to identify with the suffering around it
and if there is no visible suffering, around it, its
members will go somewhere near or far and find
some to identify with.

**--learns from the culture, doesn't close its
doors and pontificate, but is open and
listens.**

**--and intentionally participates in the life of
the city.**

We attempt here to be a faithfully public church in this extraordinary place. It's part of our tradition. I just learned this week that when, 40 years ago, there was a major police scandal in Chicago, Harrison Ray Anderson, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, appointed a three person committee of lawyers to investigate. They did and they reported to the congregation on Sunday morning during worship.

More money is earned in retailing per front foot on North Michigan Avenue than anywhere, I am told—which may or may not be true, but our neighborhood is

unique. Our closest neighbors are Bloomingdales, Marshall Field, the Four Seasons Hotel, the Westin, the Ritz Carlton, Lord & Taylor, and FAO Schwartz, which prides itself on outselling the 5th Avenue branch in New York City.

Thousands of people walk by our front door every hour —1 million per year. And more importantly, immediately behind all that commercial activity, there is a big city population living in high rises all around us. We are. Curiously, a neighborhood church. The John Hancock Building, directly across the street, reaches 100 stories into the sky—floors 40-94 are condominiums —700 of them, housing 1,700 people; that's more people than lived in the first town I served. There are

110 members of Fourth Church in that one building.
That's more than were in the first congregation I served.

More than anyone, I know the advantages of context, location, place, and while I'm sure growth is attributable to brilliant preaching and beautiful music, it is largely because we are there, with our doors open and—and this may be it, really—with a clear missional commitment to the world around us, in our case, the city.

We're convinced that mission is key to our growth and that our responsibility is always to be evaluating and asking—what more? What now? The methodology is strategic planning. Everybody is doing it—mostly better

than we are. The key is a consultant who knows how to do it—we're not all that good. We're way behind business, education, health care. You can't just do business as usual anywhere any more.

Out of our most recent strategic plan process, our new plans include: elderly housing, school clusters, community centers.

There is a virtual cottage industry out there analyzing and diagnosing, prescribing and predicting and scolding and generally fussing about the mainline churches in our culture. Each of us, I suspect, has more books on the dilemma in which we find ourselves than books on

the incarnation, and each of us, I suspect, has enough opinions to write our own book. Some of us have.

In a book I wrote—a humbling experience, to say the least, and an experience that taught me enormous respect for people who do it all the time—I maintained that part of the resolution of the problem of declining numbers—we have people who love to put our numerical progressive decline in their computer and announce that if someone doesn't do something quickly, the last living Presbyterian will die in about 47 years—my personal proposal about denominational decline is a variation on that great bit of advice President Johnson received about Viet Nam, namely

declare victory and get out; namely, stop counting and pay more attention to mission.

My argument is that our oldest tradition is a radical worldliness. Instead of sociological analysis, I propose that we go all the way back to the biblical tradition—to that incredibly fertile seed bed: the time of exile and dislocation and alienation, helplessness and corporate hand-wringing—gorgeous metaphors for what it means to be a Lutheran—or Presbyterian—in the year of our Lord, 2001. Margaret Mead said that what we are—all of us over 40—exiles in a foreign country.

You know the story.

God's people have been taken from their city and transported to another city, to Babylon. Their city has been leveled and they are living far from home, their temple, their religion, their city. Understandably they are not happy to be where they are. They are not happy with their captors. They spend most of their time thinking about going home.

It is to them, the exiled community in Babylon, that a man by the name of Jeremiah writes a remarkable letter ...

**"Seek the welfare of the city"
he tells them. "Pray to God on
the city's behalf -- for in its
welfare you will find your
welfare."**

**That's a revolutionary idea. It certainly inverts
the mode of thinking which was typical then -- as
now -- namely that your welfare will be enhanced
by**

getting away from the city, withdrawal from the city -- either physically or emotionally, by retreating into your own private spirituality.

God's people are to pray for the “community” and seek its welfare. Their own welfare is bound up in the community’s. It is the task of the church -- not simply to be a refuge from the city, but to seek the city's welfare, to live deeply and intentionally in the city and for the city, to engage the life of the city creatively, and energetically, to be open to the city -- in every way we can think of because our own welfare is at stake.

One of Peter Drucker's favorite subjects recently is what can profit-making enterprises and non-profits learn from each other. Drucker says that the most successful profit-making enterprises are those that do not focus primarily on making a profit but on something he refers to as corporate mission." [See H. Cox, Fire From Heaven, p. 236]

Isn't it ironic that at the very moment churches are desperately trying to figure out how to survive, trying everything they can think of to grow, sounding, that is to say, for all the world like struggling business enterprises in search of new markets, and new customers, business is

learning that part of the secret of success is to forget about it and pay attention to mission.

To stay alive, vital, successful, says Drucker, you have to have a mission, you have to be convinced that your product is going to be useful to your customer.

"Seek the welfare of the city -- for in its welfare is your welfare", the prophet Jeremiah said. All churches -- to the extent that they are alive and vital and viable -- know that they exist for the community around them.

Don Benedict, Director of the Community Renewal Society, once described the mission of the modern urban church as “keeping alive the rumor that there is a God.” That is what the church of the future must do and be—a living reminder to a busy, secular, preoccupied world, of the transcendent, the Holy, the sacred in the midst of life.

(Putnam pays attention to religious participation in a chapter. So does Peter Drucker, who said, “the future of America is in the hands of the churches: that community is our fundamental need and that non-profits, churches mostly—are the only community left.”)

The second event that summer was a memorial service, conducted by an Associate Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church and attended by a handful of church staff and a few members and several social workers. The event was not covered by the media. Mary Wojac was the person who had died, a 52-year old woman who looked 75, with no family, who had spent most of the past ten years on the streets of Chicago. Mary was not exactly homeless. Through the efforts of devoted and determined social workers and the staff of our Social Service Center, she had a room. But Mary was a chronic paranoid schizophrenic.

She was sick -- but in the peculiar wisdom of our society currently not sick enough to be cared for publicly. Her episodes were frequent and severe. In her paranoia she could not, would not, be in an enclosed space. She would not return to her room and lost track of the fact that she had a room.

All day long she sat on first one entry and then another, moving occasionally to the stone benches in front of the building on Michigan Avenue. Occasionally the Director of our Social Service Center, could persuade her to return to her room or to come inside the church for something to eat, or to get warm, or cool.

During her episodes Mary spent the night somewhere around the building, huddled for warmth and safety beneath its gray stone walls. Mary, even in the mysterious depth of her psychosis, knew us. When we moved a block away during renovation, she came along, continuing what was an anchoring and life-sustaining connection.

There was a sweet moment which occurred with some regularity. Our temporary quarters at 190 East Delaware, one block east, were directly across the street from the Casino Club, an old and distinguished private club with an elegant canopy to protect its members from the elements as they

come and go. It is a perfect place to be on a blustry or rainy day. Sometimes Mary, who had followed us, and who still would not come inside, spread her blanket on the doorstep of the Casino Club and lay down for an afternoon nap, for the night. Sometimes members of the Club, arriving at cocktail hour, or lunch, or departing for the day, had to carefully step over Mary enjoying her nap. Never did they ask her to leave, so far as I know and always, when I saw it, I smiled and thought maybe God was smiling at the gentle irony, but also because something of the essential nature of the church of God was being expressed.

When Mary died, of a heart condition exacerbated by her hard life, the church gathered to celebrate her life and to thank God for the gift of her life and to commend her to God's eternal care and to bear witness to a truth about the human community that occasionally gets lost in the city, namely that every person is a child of God, a valued part of God's creation, a brother or sister in God's family of humankind.

At Mt. Sinai, the people of God were given ten laws which regulated their relationship with God and also the way they lived together in society, economically, politically, personally.

The uniqueness of the story of God and God's people is precisely that it is about theology and sociology, a way of believing in God and a way of living with one's neighbors. Believing in God puts one into a new social contract. Walter Brueggemann observes that in this tradition, "You cannot say 'God' without saying 'neighbor,' nearly hyphenated 'God-neighbor.'"ⁱ

It is a defining moment when Jesus is asked "which commandment is first of all," and answers with two: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". The

ⁱWalter Brueggemann *The Covenanted Self, Explorations in Law and Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.79.

second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”ⁱⁱ

It is both/and, not either/or; God and neighbor, theology and mission, personal and public transformation, evangelism and social action.

So the church is called and commissioned by God to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and to show the good news in transformed relationship within, and acts of love and justice in the world. The world is hungry for that kind of religious wholeness.

ⁱⁱ Mark 12:29-31, New Revised Standard Version

The tutoring program at Fourth Presbyterian Church serves over five hundred fifty children from nearby public housing projects plagued by violence, unemployment and poverty. The tutors are all volunteers, mostly young urban adults working in law firms, banks, brokerage and hospitals, mostly non-church members, many non-believers, or ex-believers. The tutors meet their young students once a week for an hour and a half in the church building.

And in every monthly new members class there are always several young adults who make their witness:

“I was invited to be a tutor by a friend, signed up, worked with a student—in the church for six months. I began to care a lot about my student, and then one evening, I’m not sure why—maybe it was the music I heard from the choir rehearsal, or the picture of Jesus on the classroom wall, whatever—one evening I connected my being here tutoring a child with Jesus and what he said and stood for. So I started to attend on Sunday morning.”

It is a powerful moment when I am privileged to administer the sacrament of baptism to several young adults, kneeling in front of the congregation, often with tears of gratitude and love in their eyes.

Religion that expresses its theology in mission will communicate much about itself. Churches that hold together their beliefs about God and their love for the world and their neighbor will be vital churches.

Wallis tells about Mary Glover, a 60-year-old volunteer at Sojourner's Neighborhood Center

who helps hand out 300 bags of groceries every week. Before the doors are opened, all those who helped prepare and sort and bag the food join hands and pray. Mary Glover does the praying—prays, Wallis says, like someone who knows what it is to be poor and also prays like she knows to whom she is talking.

“She thanks God for the gift of another day. Then she prays, “Lord, we know that you’ll be coming through the line today, so help us to treat you well.” That’s good incarnational theology and that’s why we are here and it is why followers of Jesus will be in the city in his name and for his sake.

He is there ahead of us. Those old prophets not only condemned injustice and got themselves stoned for scolding the powers that be, they also were “relentless hoppers,” always seeing a beautiful vision of what, by God’s grace and human determination, could be. None, for me, is lovelier than the prophet Zechariah.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with a staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts.

**Even if it seems impossible . . . should it also
seem impossible to me? (Zechariah 8: 4-6)**

**The heart of the Gospel, the good news, is that
God is with us, that the good and gracious and
creative energy of God is with us, always,
everywhere, transforming, creating all things
new, even in the midst of desperate situations.**

**I was startled recently to see a butterfly in
Cabrini. This church is committed to Cabrini-
Green, has been in the past and will be in the
future. We have a Tutoring Program for the
children, a Center for Whole Life, a tennis**

program, we will continue to be a presence in whatever Cabrini becomes. And we sponsor a cluster of the four elementary schools that serve the neighborhood—an effort to partner with public schools and be a catalyst for school-community cooperation. One of them is Byrd Academy, a Chicago Public School in the middle of the project.

Byrd School is not particularly pretty. It has no gym, no assembly hall, no lunchroom. The students play outside weather permitting and eat in the hallways. The church staff visited Byrd Academy a few weeks ago and was shown around by the principal, Joe Gardner—a modern saint.

Byrd Academy is a source of hope. Good, caring, committed people teach there. Good, bright youngsters go to school there. Outside, the crumbling high-rises with their wire fences, deteriorating streets, blowing trash, pot holes, fire trucks roaring by followed by ambulance sirens screaming—a collage of hell. But inside—hope—a new vision of what could be by God’s grace and human determination.

At the end of our tour, Mr. Gardner showed us a wall mural created by Byrd Academy’s mentally challenged youngsters. The students had been asked to draw a picture of how the city ought to look. The mural contained signature Chicago

landmarks, Hancock and Sears Towers, more trees and grass than the students had ever seen, birds, a computer, naturally, and from side to side a symbol of transformation and hope, a cocoon and a beautiful, large, yellow butterfly, symbol of resurrection, promise of the presence of God's creative, hopeful energy—in the unlikeliest of places.

That is the good news.

Thanks be to God.